Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation (UEFISCDI)

Diaspora in the Romanian Media and Political Sphere. From Event to the Social Construction of Public Issues.

- Research report 2015 -

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I. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The project approaches the construction of intra-EU migration as a public problem in the Romanian media and political sphere. Our research will highlight *patterns of mediatization and legitimation* of diasporic identities, as well as various logics of strategically deploying the diaspora theme in the context of political and media debates and policy initiation. Our research hypothesis is that the theme of the new migration is strategically used in the public space, generating positionings, agendas and various forms of institutionalization.

Our main research questions are:

a) What *visibility patterns* do the media generate concerning *intra-EU circular migration*?

b) To what extent do the dynamics of this type of migration (actors, flows, global and European economic macro-contexts, policies, public opinion) influence the practices of mediatization of diaspora?

c) How do the media operate the shift from events and cases in various socio-economic and political contexts to *public problems*?
d) How is the theme of the “new migration” instrumentalized by various political actors, influencing political communication (agenda topics, new legitimization strategies) as well as the design of institutional policies and structures?

The project uses this foundation to analyze media representations and deliberative mechanisms centred on intra-EU migration. Specific research topics are concerned with the problematization of migration from the perspective of public interest and of certain types of responsibility, types of public debate about migration, the construction of diasporic identities and so on.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES – February 2015 – November 2015

Objectives

1) The problematization of migration in the discourse of the press and in media campaigns – the presentation of empirical findings of the 2013-2015 monitoring of the media. Focus: The positioning of the media towards the public discourses on migration in the UK in the context of the liberalisation of access to the European labour market for Romanians and Bulgarians.

2) The theme of the diaspora in the televised election debates during the 2014 presidential campaign. The design of an analytical and methodological framework and the presentation of research findings.

Research activities:

- The monitoring and analysis of press and television campaigns about the migration of Romanians to the UK (the Gândul 2013 campaign, the ProTV campaign “The Romania in the UK” 2015, the Kanal D campaign “England Is Not at Home” 2015);
- The monitoring of media discourse about the broadcasting in the UK of the documentary “The Romanians Are Coming” (the Adevărul, February 2015);
- The analysis of a corpus on remittances (economic, cultural, socio-political) and the transnational identity relationships established within these practices in three national dailies from 2011-2012: Adevărul, Evenimentul Zilei, Jurnalul Național;
- The analysis of a corpus of news/information media genres and talk shows during the presidential campaign of 2014, covering the theme of election debates.

**Research premises**

In previous studies (see our research report in 2014 available at [www.codipo.ro](http://www.codipo.ro)), we have highlighted that intra-EU migration, as a form of circular migration and a “transnational situation”, has generated specific modalities of migrant identity construction in public discourse. As social actors in a regime of mobility and belonging (both ‘here’ and ‘there’), intra-EU migrants have established particular transnational social ties, with their own symbolic configurations and forms of (re)production in the transnational field. It is a type of migration that can be ascribed to Dahinden’s category of “localised mobile transnational formation”, “combining high physical mobility and high locality” (2010: 53) in the country of origin and the country of destination, with associated practices and relations.

This “transnational pattern” (Dahinden 2010) is embedded not only in the actions of the social actors of intra-EU migration (bottom-up perspective), but also in the actions of the countries of origin and in the ways they appropriate the problem of circular migration – institutional actors, social structures, policies, public discourses (top-down perspective). Intra-EU migration has thus brought into relief two significant aspects:

1. a (more prominent) positioning of sending countries as agents in these transnationalising processes, which implies the appropriation of migration as a (trans)national public problem;

2. a simultaneity of public positionings in the sending and destination countries, including the emergence of discursive interactions at different scales and in different arenas – states, media, the EU, articulated as a space of transnational public opinion.

The scholarly literature generally analyses the perspective of the sending countries in economic terms (remittances) or by examining forms of engagement on the part of these countries towards their national communities abroad. Authors such as Waterbury (2010) underscore the divide between the studies about the countries of origin and about the countries of destination as an analytical and methodological obstacle to the understanding of the
“transnational engagement” of the countries of origin towards their migrants and their integration “into the homeland state political community” (132).

On the other hand, there has been significantly less research on the social construction of the sending country perspective – by taking into consideration the ways in which positionings, politics and types of public discourse towards the migration problem (media, politics, citizenship etc.) are (re)articulated in various contexts; similarly, less emphasis has been placed on the ways in which the media and other public actors in the countries of origin and destination participate in the configuration of transnational practices, by engaging the national communities in the countries of destination and at the same time connecting the national audience to the migrants’ transnationalism (see Beciu & Lazăr 2014).

Such dynamics of intra-EU migration have surfaced in the public spheres of post-communist states as sending countries, after their accession to the European Union, in the context of the liberalisation of labour markets and EU policies on free circulation, and in the context of the economic crisis. We consider the sending state a crucial agent in the transnational social field and we are interested not only in unidirectional actions – from the sending state to the diaspora (a more common analytical focus) – but in the dynamics of interactions between the country of origin and the diaspora, which can be revealed, we argue, by looking at the public discourses of the sending country (positionings and commitments towards intra-EU migration). The mediation of the migrants’ transnationalism in the public sphere of the sending country brings about a reframing of the national angle as part of the process of establishing transnational public arenas.

In Romania, labour migration, upheld by an ethos of circular mobility, has become a permanent topic on the public agenda. As such, it has been incorporated in multiple logics of instrumentalisation (Beciu 2012; Beciu and Lazăr 2014). These logics include: migration as a political/election theme, integrated into strategies of legitimisation of political positionings; migration as an identity theme, integrated into political and media discourses that engage with/interpellate certain identity patterns (collective identities, mentalities, practices); migration as a theme that is correlated with the positioning of the sending country in a European field of political action, integrated into discourses on the image of the country and on Romania’s status in relation to other EU states. These logics of instrumentalisation co-exist, interpenetrate or
achieve prominence depending on the local/European/transnational contexts and on a certain progression of the media and political discourse.

The Romanian media have taken on the role of responding and producing counter-discourses on the one hand to the restrictive immigration policies in the countries of destination and, on the other hand, especially after 2013, to the public discourses in the countries of destination about the negative effects of massive immigration from Romania and Bulgaria (the liberalisation of access to the European labour market). The policies and the public statements in the countries of destination (both the anti-immigration ones and the “positive” ones) have been interpreted from the viewpoint of country image and of the status of the country of origin and of its citizens in the European field (generalisations and stereotypes affecting the country’s image; status depreciation).

Starting from these premises, we have analysed the problematisation in the Romanian media of migration and of the representation of migrants as social actors (1) in press campaigns (Gândul, Adevărul) and (2) in the context of the broadcasting in the UK of a documentary about Romanian migrants. The Gândul campaign has been constructed “in the mirror” to the campaign staged by the Guardian (starting from the anti-immigration statement of a British politician, the newspaper mobilized to public to make ironic comments on this statement, by supplying “arguments” to prevent Romanians and Bulgarians from looking for work in the UK). The documentary The Romanians Are Coming (Keo Films, 2015), broadcast by Channel 4 in three episodes in February-March 2015, marks a particular moment in the dynamics of the (counter-)discourses developed by the Romanian media, against the backdrop of a certain progression of the transnational engagement of the Romanian press with public discourses in the UK and the emergence of a Romanian media construction of the anti-immigration discourse in the UK, as far as Romanian migrants are concerned (the 2013-2014 debates on the lifting of transnational restrictions; the 2006 debates on Romania’s and Bulgaria’s accession). As a result, the documentary was perceived, at least initially, as a new example of discourse that damages the image of Romanians and of the country.
2. Migration as a public issue. The public sphere in the destination countries and Romania’s repositioning through counter-discourse

The analysis of the corpus “The migration of Romanians to the UK”, consisting of: the Gândul press campaign (2014); opinion articles in the daily newspaper Adevărul (24 articles, February-March 2015) referring to the broadcasting in the UK of the documentary The Romanians Are Coming! (produced by KEO Films and broadcast in three episodes by Channel 4 in February-March 2015); the ProTV campaign “The Romania Inside the UK” (April 2015), reportages about the documentary The Romanians Are Coming broadcast on Channel 4 (April-May 2015); the Kanal D campaign “England is not at home”.

The counter-discourse: An identity repositioning

The reaction of the media and the political class in Britain in connection with the risk of an influx of Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants has witnessed a steady coverage from 2013 on. The media in Romania will give a special visibility to negative reactions, presented as a dominant discourse in the UK public sphere. The newspapers constantly quote a series of metaphors used by British journalists (“an invasion of Romanians”, “hordes of Romanians and Bulgarians”, “mass exodus of Romanians to the UK”, “Britain 'under siege' from Romanian migrants”) to legitimize the existence of an anti-Romanian discourse and even a campaign and to define an asymmetric relation between “us” (as state, national community) and “them” (as state, the media, the public opinion in the UK).

Romanian journalists will position themselves in relation to two types of discursive practice: daily articles in the British (tabloid and quality) press assessed as part of an anti-immigration and anti-Romanian “campaign” (“British media hysteria” over the influx of migrants) and the actual media campaigns. This will result in a serialization of this issue that is to be also linked with the growing marketisation of the quality media in Romania.

In the articulation of these counter-discourses produced by the press in Romania, we have identified two main macro-strategies (Wodak, 2002) which instantiate situations, identities and

1 This study was presented at the conference EAST – WEST EUROPEAN FORUM ON DISCOURSE - WARSAW / May 2015 and is currently in press. Citing or using the data in any way without the authors' permission (Camelia Beciu, Mirela Lazăr) is a serious infringement of copyright owners' rights.
power relations between the social actors. The first strategy is meant to legitimize the existence of a dominant public discourse in the UK that is discriminatory against Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants and, implicitly, against Romanians in general. The second aims at delegitimizing this dominant discourse and redefining the symbolic power relations by revaluing the status of Romanian migrants and, accordingly, the national status. Both these macro-strategies are based on specific micro-strategies in order to establish identities and power relations of which the most used are the discursive representation of identity categories and the management of voices.

We consider these macro-strategies in the dialectics of consecration-dismantling a dominant discourse. The various modes of delegitimizing the dominant discourse used by the press in Romania strengthened, for spectacular reasons, the representation of a concerted action in the British public sphere. The interpretive role of journalists was performed mainly through the strategic use of certain types of “voices” through which forms of engagement and definitions of the public issue were being shaped in that particular context.

For legitimizing a dominant discourse in the British media sphere, the Romanian press frequently mobilized the representation of the national community as a category which is situated within an unequal power relation. Through the strategic use of pronouns (“we”, “you”), the journalists ‘indexicalize’ a ‘victim’-category that includes “us”, the public, as citizens, as a national community sharing a collective national identity, and, at the same time, as a state actor. Another way to establish the dominant discourse consists in representing the Romanian migrants as a vulnerable category, through using the voices of witnesses, of the Romanians working in the UK.

The delegitimizing of the dominant discourse is accomplished primarily by mobilizing the polyphony of the power field in which politicians from the UK and from Romania, MEPs from Romania and from other European countries, representatives of European institutions, and international experts are involved. The media constantly cite the statements that Romanian officials (ambassadors, Ministers, MEPs) made in opposition to the statements of some British politicians, while retrieving those parts which evaluate the migration issue in terms of a European responsibility and respect for the values of European citizenship. The labour market access and the anti-immigrants rhetoric focused on Romanians and Bulgarians are defined as a
European public issue, which the Romanian media highlight by invoking the European argument upheld by politicians.

“The statement referring to the need for fingerprinting Romanian and Bulgarian citizens is a deeply unfortunate statement because not only does it introduce an element of discrimination in the treatment of European citizens, but it is contrary to the EU fundamental principles and values. (...) I believe that a call for responsibility and restraint in the public rhetoric of European politicians is needed”, said [Romanian foreign affairs minister] Corlatean at a press conference at the European Commission Representation in Romania. (Evenimentul Zilei, 8 January 2014)

Operating through the dialectics of dismantling-consecration of this dominant discourse, the press emphasises the voices that are favourable to Romanian immigrants in the British media in order to counter the dominant discourse for the public in Romania, and also to reinforce the idea of an anti-immigrant campaign in Britain. The strategic selection of favourable views is not explicitly integrated into a discourse on the diverse framings in the British media. It is not explicitly mentioned that not all the press in the UK adopts anti-immigration views. This assessment is rather implicit. What emerges is the fact that other types of discourse also circulate in the British political sphere that is however dominated by an anti-immigration rhetoric.

**Media campaigns**

Starting in 2013, the press in Romania has increasingly resorted to the practice of media campaigns to take stands towards the public discourse regarding the Romanian immigrants in the destination countries. These campaigns were launched in response to statements from politicians in the UK or to a wider dissemination of media products about Romanian immigrants (documentaries, movies, reports, etc.).

At the end of 2013, the newspaper *Gandul* and the Romanian GMP Advertising launched an interactive media campaign (“We may not like Britain, but you will love Romania. Why don’t you come over?”) that engaged the public participation, thus enhancing the public's role as a social actor. This campaign consisted in publishing a series of posters with the readers' messages through a humorous approach to stereotypes about the two countries, aiming to demonstrate that Romania could be a country of emigration for the Brits, more attractive than Britain for Romanians.
The campaign concept assumed by the Romanian journalists lay in a re-contextualization of stereotypes about Great Britain, in reply to the counter-discourses generated by the initiative of the British newspaper *The Guardian* to call out its readers to submit their “tongue-in-cheek suggestions” of which aspects of British life should be included in a reported UK ministers’ negative ad campaign aimed to deter Romanian immigration to that country.

The journalists from the *Gândul* have consistently placed this campaign in a field of antagonistic reactions among the public both in Romania and in the UK, by monitoring on the one hand the reported campaign in Britain and on the other hand, the campaign in Romania. The visibility of the British campaign contributed to legitimizing – in a spectacular way – the existence of a dominant discourse having a certain dynamics.

Thus, the campaign was built and assumed as a dispositive of identity repositioning against the “outside” (“us” and “them” - the British) as well as the “inside” (“we” in relation to the identity stereotypes and practices we produce ourselves about us). This dispositive allows the Romanian press to reproduce the social imaginary about “us and Europe”, and “we in Europe” put forth in recent years: the position as a state and as a nation in the European field of power implies a project of competitive visibility.

*The documentary “The Romanians Are Coming”*²

N.B.: This material is in preparation for publication

The public debate around the documentary unfolds within two frames: 1) the media counter-discourse as a practice of appropriating an identity rhetoric; 2) the media counter-discourse to the public discourses in the UK (the UK public sphere as interlocutor).

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² This study was presented at the *DiscourseNet Congress #1*, Bremen, Germany, 24-26 September, 2015, and is currently in preparation for publication. Citing or using the data in any way without the authors’ permission (Camelia Beciu, Mălina Ciocea, Irina D. Mădroane) is a serious infringement of copyright owners’ rights.
The documentary presents the perspective of Romanian migrants who are generally deprived of resources, come from very poor regions, most of them belonging to the Roma community (with one exception in Episode 2). The main reasons for protest/criticism in the Romanian media, correlated to similar reactions on the part of politicians and the Romanian diaspora in the UK, have to do with what was considered to be generalisations about Romanian migrants in the documentary:

- not all Romanian migrants are poor or work in illegal conditions, many are well-integrated and contribute to the economies of both countries;
- the image of the country (Romania is not only a poor country);
- the position/image of the Romanians in the UK (they risk being discriminated against because of such portrayals);
- the position of Romanians/Romania in Europe (second-class citizens; where “we” stand in relation to “the others”).

What resulted was a veritable “media repertoire”, which transformed the documentary into a public agenda theme (constant mediatisation during the Channel 4 broadcast as well as afterwards). The documentary became a favouring/facilitating context for media campaigns that “mirror” the lives of Romanians “in London” or the “deep world” of Romanian migrants and for social media reactions of Romanians in the UK. At a first stage of the counter-discourse, both the press and the televisions recounted each episode broadcast by Channel 4, casting the migrants from the documentary in roles of “soap-opera” characters and reinforcing thus the reductionist approach of the British documentary. At a second stage, some newspapers (the *Adevarul*) published opinion articles on the documentary, and, at a third stage, campaigns about the “deep world” of Romanian migration followed.

The main research findings show that the media discourses in the Romanian public sphere have imposed certain “reading grids”, by using the documentary as a resource to create new meanings, positionings and identity relationships:

**A critical reading** of the documentary for the Romanian public. From this perspective, the documentary is interpreted as a result of political games and of the anti-immigration public opinion in the UK. This reading exposes the intentions of the British media and aims not only to
inform, but also to educate the public. It rests upon an expert discourse about the British political context and the British media, as well as a discourse about the documentary as a genre (should we expect it to reflect the “reality” or is it a form of infotainment?). Within this reading grid, the migrants’ transnational experience is interpreted in correlation with the positions taken by the institutions in the country of destination – the UK – and the power relations at European level:

“The scandal caused by the Channel 4 documentary “The Romanians Are Coming” raises several issues and it does well that it does. On the one hand, the title is clearly politicised, in the usual style of the alarmist anti-immigration political tone which the Brits have also used with the Poles and, before them, with the immigrants from the British colonies.” (Adevărul blog, 28 February 2015)

An engaged reading, which continues the strategy of the press campaigns from 2013 and 2014 against the stereotypes and the discrimination of Romanians in the British press. This is the dominant reading grid in our corpus. It relies upon various discursive mechanisms which, even though they take into account the migrants’ transnational experiences, they also reduce them to certain themes and schematic categories. Thus, they reaffirm strategically identities that exclude or include particular social actors: the integrated migrants, who do us proud and contribute an image capital vs. the migrants who commit crimes, cannot find a job, do not speak English and shame us; the distinction between the majority and the Roma minority.

This interpretive frame and the discursive strategies it deploys (the depersonalisation of the migrants-characters in the documentary, the spectacularisation of the narratives, individualisation, but combined with the production of schematic categories, the comparative description of life in the UK and of life in Romania etc.) prevail in the corpus, which confirms the existence of a well-defined tendency towards instrumentalisation in the Romanian media discourses on the documentary, especially in terms of the country’s image:

“The British press announces the counter-attack of the Brasov inhabitants to “The Romanians Are Coming!”: An English journalist has volunteered to promote the successful Romanians in the UK.” (Adevărul, 3 March 2015)

“The Romanians in the UK are up in arms about a documentary broadcast by a British television about the Roma who live in the UK.” („Vin românii !”, Știrile ProTv, 18 February 2015)
“The Romanians who migrate without qualifications, without speaking English, seem to be the most willing to live like nomads in one of the most cosmopolitan places in the world.” („România din Regatul Unit. Ep. 6”, Știrile ProTv, 6 mai 2015)

“They are daily in the streets and spoil Romania’s image. The tide of workers by the day, prostitutes, crooks and beggars triggers a tide of rejection from a state where decency is highly appreciated.” („România din Regatul Unit. Ep. 6”, ProTv, 6 mai 2015)

A self-reflexive reading, which comes from blogs and the civil society, and is therefore not dominant. This reading grid deconstructs certain categories and interpretations that have already become hegemonic in the Romanian public sphere (see above). From this perspective, the documentary is a resource used by the press for several purposes: to raise awareness and legitimise a collective responsibility towards the situation of Romanian migrants; to problematise the poverty in the country and the failure of the authorities, and in this way to put pressure on the political class; to problematise the discrimination against the Roma. Within this frame, the documentary has a protest/activism potential for the Roma community, many citizens and analysts evaluating it in a positive manner and considering it even an opportunity for solidarity:

“Considering the reaction of the diaspora and of the ambassador, you’d be tempted to think we are the smartest people in the world and definitely the only employees with high qualifications in the UK: doctors, engineers, specialists in atomic physics. We can’t stand it when the Brits portray us as dressed in other attire than business and working busily in Canary Wharf.” (Adevărul blog, 22 February, 2015)

The research demonstrates the fact that even though the media refer to migrants in their transnational situation, they continue to impose (1) polarised categories of migrants and (2) an interpretation of migration in relation to the country image and our status towards the Other (Europe). A new element in the existing discursive configurations is the self-critical, self-reflexive reading of the documentary, but this interpretive frame is at an early stage.
3. The media construction of the transnational identity relationships established between migrants and non-migrations around remitting practices\(^3\)

Analysis of a corpus of media articles (news stories, opinion articles etc.) from three national dailies (Adevărul, Jurnalul Național, Evenimentul Zilei) in 2011-2012, on the topic of remittances and the identities and transnational relations shaped around them.

The study (Mădroane 2015) synthesized in this report discusses the discursive construction of the remittances sent by Romanian migrants and of the transnational relationships established around them in a series of contexts that pertain to a problematization of circular, intra-EU migration in the Romanian media.

Remittances are defined in the study both as transnational practices and as types of capital (economic, political, socio-cultural) transferred within the transnational social field as part of such practices (Levitt 1998, 2001, a.o.).

The research questions are aimed at the debates and contexts in which the media examine remittances, the relationships and ties that are fostered between migrants and non-migrants, at an individual, but also collective and institutional level, as well as the values and goals associated with remittances, which could be used to legitimize certain development policies.

The corpus consists of 221 texts from the years 2011-2012, from three daily quality newspapers (Adevărul, Jurnalul Național, Evenimentul Zilei), and the methodology employed rests upon tools from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003; Fairclough & Fairclough 2012; Van Leeuwen 2008).

The findings indicate that the main contexts in which the press discusses and debates remittances (in the selected corpus) take shape around the following topics: migration and the economic recession; migration and development; the negative effects of migration on family life; country image; the political representation of migrants (the issue of the vote by postal ballot) and their civic engagement. Even though migrants are invested with a certain prestige and power, due to remittances as economic, political and socio-cultural capital, and transnational solidarity with

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non-migrants is emphasized, the main tendency is that of instrumentalization of the migrants’ identities, of relocating them within projects initiated by national actors who attempt to strategically reposition themselves in the transnational social field (Beciu 2012; Beciu & Lazăr 2014).

This tendency limits the debate around remitting, and preference is given to categories such as “heroes”, who save the Romanian economy from the economic recession or who make a positive contribution (or negative, in the case of “anti-heroes”), depending on the ways in which remittances have been obtained in the countries of destination.

A more nuanced debate, with more potential for identity negotiation, can be noticed in the articles about families with migrants, whose children or old aged parents left in the country of origin experience an emotional trauma. The criticism targeted by journalists and other analysts at the political class situates migrants within a civic project, aimed at “taking our country back”, a slogan frequently used in recent protests.

The media debates and construals of identities around remitting are situated within a transnational frame, but what prevails is an instrumentalization of such identities and a reinforcement of divisions among migrants and between migrants and non-migrants (of social class, gender, age, status). There is, however, a certain openness towards grassroots action, which could lead to changes in media discourses in the future, provided that the collective identity of the Romanian diaspora gains strength.

4. The construction of migration in the 2014 presidential campaign – televised election debates. Analytical elements (1)

Corpus: news/ information media genres and talk shows during the presidential campaign; the two election debates on Realitatea TV and B1 TV; eight information sequences from the category of “news”, followed by a discussion in the studio between the journalist-moderator and guests (Realitatea TV, Antena3, B1TV, Digi 24) and nine talk shows (Realitatea TV, Antena3, Digi 24).

We propose at a first stage of research an analysis about the ways in which Romanian televisions have constructed the election debate in 2014 as a media event and a public problem. We started from the observation that, in the 2014 presidential campaign, the organization of televised debates was a source of numerous controversies, being a topic on the media agenda especially in the period before the second ballot. We were first interested in the organization of the election
debate as a media event and, in correlation, as an election agenda theme, due to the fact that the media emphasised certain types of information and contexts of visibility. Secondly, we looked at the problematisation of the election debate, that is the types of consensual and normative positions taken by the media in order to make the transition from “event” to “public problem”, by highlighting particular interpretations of the debates, causes, responsibilities and forms of public action. We considered this stage necessary, given that the diaspora theme became a main theme during the second voting round, in particular, basically dominating the election agenda. Our analysis was therefore carried out along the following dimensions:

(1) the ways in which the Romanian televisions constructed the election debates as events and, at the same time, public problems;
(2) the analysis of television debates as dispositives of election communication;
(3) the analysis of the thematisation of diaspora during discursive exchanges between candidates.

In what follows we present research aspects and findings related to the first dimension.

The public space and televised electoral debates. Towards a methodological framework

We are introducing a constructivist approach to media public space to highlight (1) the symbolic negotiation of meaning attributed to electoral debates by the media, experts or opinion leaders and (2) practices used by the media to catch public attention for electoral debates.

Correlating these research tracks, we define media public space as:

a. The public visibility of various positions on the relationship between event and public interest (hence, the need for broad access of social actors to mediatization and the need for media dispositifs focused, one way or another, on deliberation);
b. Competing interactions among various social actors with a view to legitimizing public problems.

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4 This section is part of the study: “Dezbaterile electorale și rolul media în campania prezidențială 2014 din România”, Revista Română de Sociologie nr. 3-4, 2015, 253-278 / ISSN: 1224-9262.
In this analytical perspective, the media’s role is to generate and underline at the same time the pluralism of viewpoints (“the ideas market”), the consensus, negotiation or divergent positions. On the other hand, we should not ignore the fact that in an increasingly personalised and spectacular political and media sphere, the media themselves are actors taking viewpoints, interacting with politicians, opinion leaders, experts and the public. Thus, the media face a triple constraint:

a. To produce visibility of various viewpoints and interactions leading to their development;

b. To mediate the public’s engagement (in terms of interest, responsibility, participation, including various interactions among the media and “the active public” integrated in the debate arena);

c. To establish their position on the events and themes under debate.

We are also operationalizing the category “problematization”, using elements from discourse analysis. This category (a dimension of deliberative communication) covers various types of evaluative assertions – a rhetoric repertoire in its own right – whose structure includes some general understanding of public interest definitions and the need for an engagement with a public problem (for instance, consensual assertions about “what we all know”, normative assertions about responsibilities and ways of acting, value judgements, types of claims, etc.). Essentially, these are assertions that delimit a problem, placing events and actions of social actors into a generality horizon (what perturbs “us”, responsibilities, moral judgements, claims, obligations, etc.).

Electoral debates in the context of media agenda

The tendency in the presidential campaign in 2014 was for the TV stations to mediatize the electoral event within shows that preserved the format of their regular shows. The news and political debates channels such as Realitatea TV, Antena 3 and B1 TV adapted their prime time shows to the electoral context by simply adding the “electoral debate” logo or by reconfiguring the studio so that the TV dispositif should be associated with the electoral context (for instance the talk show “Sintezazilei” (“Daily Synthesis”) from Antena 3 had a special scene, “Biroul președintelui” (“The president’s office”).
On the other hand, the shows specially designed for the electoral period were not frequent. The public TV station (TVR 1) created the format “PreședintepentruRomânia” (“President for Romania”), and Digi24 kept its regular political shows, although they were reconfigured for the electoral campaign. Because there were few new electoral shows, the spectacular polemic pattern of the channels’ well-established talk shows was a constant presence. TV political communication in the electoral campaign developed in line with the communicational ethos of the most representative shows for the identity of those channels. For instance, this communicational ethos reproduced the polarized TV sphere of channels for or against political powers. This tendency continued in the presidential elections campaign, with consequences on the electoral agenda.

The electoral context mainly highlighted a set of themes approached by most TV stations, which formed an electoral agenda (the main theme was justice, followed by themes such as the president’s role, changes in the Constitution, Romania’s international relations and so on). In some cases the debate was influenced by the TV station’s position towards political families and candidates.

Another category was the themes generated by ongoing events in the electoral campaign or by candidates’ declarations. There are themes (such as the theme of religion) on the media’s immediate agenda which we found in the main political informative shows on various channels.

A separate category was that of themes introduced by journalists and developed in specific ways by TV channels which assumed openly a counterdiscourse against a candidate (aspects from the candidate’s biography and political past, the strategic recontextualization of objectives from the candidates’ programs, disclosures of governmental policies which could be associated with candidates etc.).

As a tendency, the TV channels offered visibility to campaign attacks in shows inviting one of the candidates or representatives of the political family/electoral team of the candidate. The polemic among candidates took place indirectly, through candidates’ reactions in dialogue with moderators, in the absence of countercandidates.

These practices of political-electoral journalism were to contribute towards the end of the presidential campaign to the legitimization of the debate among candidates as an event and theme on the electoral agenda. In line with this tendency is the TV stations’ practice of inviting representatives of the candidate’s party/staff to meet “face to face” in an electoral dispositif
highlighting the confrontation among electoral “teams”. In the TVR 1 show “President for Romania” the TV dispositif established a new category of participants in electoral shows, “the candidate’s representative”. The show format involved inviting two of the presidential elections’ candidates, but in most cases the participants were representatives appointed by candidates, the show’s moderators interacting with them “as if” they were talking to candidates. In the few cases where a candidate participated in the show (usually, a candidate without a notable position in opinion polls), the other participant in the show was the countercandidate’s representative (which candidate could have important electoral capital). This led to symbolic gaps in participation status. These confrontations among the candidates’ electoral teams activated a debate imaginary among candidates, announcing the theme of the electoral debates.

The electoral debate became a theme on the political and media agenda in the second round of the presidential campaign. In fact, at this stage, the media agenda was dominated by two themes generated by the immediate context of the campaign: the theme of the diaspora (the problem of voting sites abroad and the situation of Romanians abroad who could not vote in the first round) and the theme of the televised debate between the two candidates Klaus Iohannis and Victor Ponta, running in the second round. The intense mediatization of these “situational” themes generated a certain framing of the electoral campaign – (1) the campaign as an ongoing event and (2) the candidates’ campaign tactics. In fact, these frames were frequently introduced by TV stations in the first round of the campaign.

Compared to previous electoral campaigns, the 2015 campaign saw TV stations giving more space to campaign evaluation shows, where journalists and their guests (analysts, opinion leaders, communication specialists, psychologists etc.) interpreted the candidates’ declarations and tactics, evaluated the quality of the electoral campaign and anticipated the evolution of the power relationships among countercandidates. This time the evaluation of the electoral campaign by the media became more technical, meaning that the shows activated the imaginary of electoral marketing, each gesture of politicians being measured against effects (the candidate’s “electoral profile”, “psychological profile”, electoral slogan, the candidate’s general style were commented upon) – for instance, on Realitatea TV one of the electoral shows (“The electoral couch”) weekly evaluated the candidates’ psychological profile, with the help of psychologists and communication specialists invited to the show.

In the second round of the campaign this type of framing – “the campaign technique” or
“the strategic frame”, according to de Vreese and M. Elenbaas (2011) – became increasingly dominant because of events such as the vote in the diaspora and the uncertainty about organising a TV debate. In this stage, the candidates’ and the staff’s positions towards the events generated by the electoral context occupied the media agenda to a greater extent than the main themes of the electoral campaign. On the other hand, in the process of the spectacularization of electoral mediatization, one can notice that in the 2009 and 2015 campaigns the media increasingly offered visibility to the way candidates manage events during the campaign.

The electoral debate: a public problem?

The presidential elections in 2014 showed more than any other campaign that electoral debates are not yet a well-established practice and ritual in the post-communist political and media culture. Controversies surrounding the electoral debate indicate a certain public perception: the debate depends on conjuncture and candidates’ will expressed through a series of negotiations among staff. It is relevant that the very media discourse on the electoral debate is the expression of this context defined more by conjuncture than by (absent) symbolic forms of institutionalization of the electoral debate.

The media started approaching the theme of the televised debate when one of the candidates (Victor Ponta) launched, at the end of the first round of the elections, the invitation to his countercandidate to participate in four televised debates, on different TV stations (Antena 3, Realitatea TV, România TV, B1 TV), all of which were part of the polarized field of channels supporting (more or less explicitly) one or the other of the candidates. This strategy was immediately reframed by the media, as those TV stations launched the invitation for the candidates to participate in a televised debate.

The other candidate, Klaus Iohannis, rejected the TV stations proposition and declared himself available for participating in a debate organised by one of the prominent universities (initially, West University of Timisoara was mentioned, later, The University of Bucharest). Other public actors joined the debate: the Institute for Public Policies suggested organising the debate at the Palace of the Parliament (the frame in the 2009 debate) and, finally, president Traian Băsescu himself was in favour of a debate at Palatul Cotroceni, promising not to be at the presidential palace at the moment of the debate.

We can notice in this interaction several levels of status negotiation in a field of
competing relations among candidates, among the media and the candidates, among the media and other organisations (NGOs, for instance).

The negotiation between candidates regarded the initiative itself, each candidate trying to be the first to establish the conditions of the debate – mainly the place of the debate, the organising institution and even the number of debates.

Thus, Victor Ponta and his electoral team maintained the position of “a debate assumed by TV stations”, while Klaus Iohannis considered that a neuter space was needed (the university) and full equality of public access and visibility.

We must mention that in 2009, for the first time in an electoral campaign, the debates among candidates took place at the Palace of the Parliament. We have previously highlighted (Beciu, 2011) the phenomenon of the delocalization of the TV debate, which no longer falls into the realm of the media, but is initiated and organised by an NGO. It was somehow self-understood that only that organisation could manage the relationship with the candidates and their staff, which promoted the electoral debate as the exclusive product of negotiations. In 2014 Victor Ponta and his electoral team invoked – obviously, for other reasons than the role of the media in a democracy – the very argument that the media should assume a role in organising an electoral debate. The position of his counter-candidate, Klaus Iohannis, can probably be explained through the polarization of the TV sphere in Romania at that moment. His participation in debates organised by the two TV stations suggested by Victor Ponta (recognised for a type of political positioning) would have meant to accept this polarized media context, hence the idea of an academic context for the debate. Afterwards, the staff of Victor Ponta added a supplementary argument, that universities should not “be political”, which obviously is not the same with hosting a political event with major implications for the citizen-voter – in fact, a strategic recontextualization of the significance of a long-standing principle in academia that university should not be politicized.

In both cases we can see the problematic aspect which was invoked in this electoral campaign as well: the role of the media in organising electoral debates and the consolidation of debate as a democratic practice.

On the other hand, for both the candidates and the media, the electoral debate was used as a legitimizing source for one’s status and deligitimizing source for the counter-candidate. The candidates accused each other of avoiding participation in the debate, which resulted in an attack
theme frequently used in last two weeks of the campaign. This polemic was prolonged not as much by the candidates, but by their representatives, prominent members of the political family (as in the campaign in 2009, one can notice in the 2014 campaign the intense visibility of the candidate’s team, a “continuation” of his attack discourse and a media method of strengthening the image of the confrontation between political “sides”, rather than political programs).

It was not only the candidates, but also the TV stations as media actors that used the theme of the debate to legitimize themselves as the channel that succeeded in organising the electoral debate. The journalists chose their positions not by considering the role of the media in consolidating the electoral debate as a practice in the political and media culture of a country, but rather as competing actors on a TV market, each TV station trying to justify why it was the most appropriate venue for the debate.

All these strategies of candidates and TV stations (especially those creating in time a politically polarized TV sphere) to use the theme of the electoral debate indicate a process that we could call “the privatization” of the electoral debate – its approach as a resource from the perspective of competing interests and stakes of electoral actors. In fact, this process continued after the electoral debates finally took place.

In this case we can see as well that in evaluating electoral debates, the media invoke public interest in a certain way, by referring to the necessity of dialogue among candidates. In other words, aspects which are generally discussed about forming a deliberative media space (such as the access to diversified information sources, equal participation in the discursive exchange etc.) are approached instrumentally within a partisan and/or competing media space.

Our research shows a process of electoral debates “privatization”. Both candidates and the media approached the electoral debate as competing actors in the electoral and media field. Thus, the candidates saw the debate as a source of self-legitimization and delegitimization of the counter-candidate. In their turn, journalists associated the development of the electoral debate with the competitive status of the TV station in the media field (the channel’s credibility, the journalists’ competence and experience etc.). From this perspective, the controversies surrounding the organisation of the electoral debate highlighted the symbolic negotiation of the status as debate organiser and/or initiator, part of a broader strategy for reasserting competing media identity or, in the candidates’ case, for establishing ascendancy (in terms of image and electoral capital) against the countercandidate.
These elements indicate the absence of institutionalization at formal or symbolic level of the electoral debate in the political and media culture in Romania. Each campaign consolidated the representation of the debate as an electoral practice depending rather on the candidates’ will and less on a political and media “communication contract”.

Conclusions

One of the premises we started from is that in the Romanian public sphere migration has been constantly associated with the problem of Romania’s image in Europe, depending on the migrants’ actions in the countries of destination. As a result, at a first stage, the media approached the issue of Romania’s country image in the European context as an identity problem (‘we in Europe’) which could be solved by accumulating symbolic capital, that is by making good use of any resource (migration included) that could generate a competitive country image.

Once anti-immigration discourses started emerging in the destination countries, the Romanian media interpreted them from the perspective of Romania’s status in the European field of power. In other words, “we”, as identity discourse appropriated by the press, can reveal in a much more prominent manner the status of the country and of its citizens in the EU political and economic space.

The mediation of concrete problems such as the access to the European labour market or the perception of Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants in the countries of destination confirms the fact that the media associate migration with the wider problem of asymmetric power relations between EU member-states and between Romanian and the countries of destination, respectively.

The redefinition of migration as a public problem is achieved by mobilising certain types of identity counter-discourses, used by the media in order to demonstrate the existence of a dominant anti-immigration discourse and to delegitimise it.

The reactions in the Romanian public sphere to the documentary “The Romanians Are Coming”, broadcast in the UK in 2015, marks in a more prominent fashion by comparison to previous discourses the media framing of migration as a “deep world” – individuals or groups that have multiple ties of belonging, as part of circular mobility patterns between the country of origin and the country of destination. The media produce and circulate representations of the
migrants’ transnationalism (their “voices”), but integrated into an instrumental approach to migration (in connection with the collective identity/ “collective we” and “our” status in Europe).

References


